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ABSTRACT

The publication of "Inequality" by Christopher Jencks last fall occasioned a storm of controversy, especially among those in education. The findings of the Harvard professor rejected a sacred cow--that there is any correlation between one's education and income. Meeting at Teachers College, Columbia University recently for the expressed purpose of examining Jencks' study were four educators: Gertrude S. Goldberg and Nicolaus Mills, Scholars in Residence at ERIC/IRCD, and Joseph Grannis and David Wilder, Professors of Education at Teachers College. Goldberg examines two basic questions: whether Jencks has shown that school reform is a poor strategy for reducing economic inequality and how, if not as an anti-poverty measure, equal educational opportunity is to be justified. Mills maintains that although we can agree with Jencks in some respects, utimately this book extraordinarily misleading, in terms of what it suggests and in terms of what it cites as evidence. Wilder states that his chief problem with the book is that the focus of research is not on how one might improve schools or education but rather on how we can use the schools to do what he does not think they are supposed to be doing: namely, improving the distribution of economic rewards in our society. Grannis points out that the book does not address the vital questions: What part might the schools play in the reconstruction of society? Dare the schools build a new social order? (Author/JM)

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"INEQUALITY" by Christopher Jencks: Four Critical Reactions

The publication of **"Inequality"** by **Christopher Jencks** last fall occasioned a storm of controversy, especially among those in education. The findings of the Harvard professor rejected a sacred cow—that there is any correlation between one's education and income.

Meeting at Teachers College, Columbia University recently for the expressed purpose of examining Jencks' study were four educators: **Gertrude S. Goldberg** and **Nicolaus Mills**, Scholars in Residence at ERIC/IRCD, and **Joseph Grannis** and **David Wilder**, Professors of Education at Teachers College. The following is a record of their views.

GERTRUDE S. GOLDBERG

I find it hard to take issue with the work of "thoroughgoing egalitarians," for it is good to hear Jencks and his fellow authors make such statements as: "...inequality that derives from biology ought to be as repulsive as inequality that derives from early socialization." Yet, a major study of inequality that attempts a "reassessment of the effect of family and schooling in America" must be judged by more rigorous standards than the egalitarian values of its authors.

The authors, who examine inequality in relation to such factors as school expenditures, cognitive skills, educational attainment, occupational status, and income, report findings that suggest that reducing inequalities in educational resources would not significantly alter the distribution of income in this country. Their findings, if accepted, challenge the assumptions upon which much public policy has been based, namely that increasing educational opportunities for the poor will increase their future earning power. Although educational resources for advantaged groups need not be justified as anti-poverty measures, we tend to consider expenditures for the poor unnecessary unless they improve employability, and presumably income. In discussing this work we therefore need to examine two basic questions: whether Jencks has shown that school reform is a poor strategy for reducing economic inequality and how, if not as an anti-poverty measure, equal educational opportunity is to be justified.

Jencks shows that educational opportunities remain quite unequal, as judged by expenditures of schools in different districts. But, he is not optimistic about the effects of disparities in expenditures in an effort to overcome the cognitive inequalities resulting from background factors. It has often been stressed that school expenditures are unsatisfactory indices of school inputs and that more attention should be given to such variables as quality of teaching and principalship, and to parental participation in school decisions. Further, since children have such different educational needs as a result of their backgrounds, we should think in terms of treatment that is equally responsive to their various needs.

People who have been denied access to resources that most people value feel deprived, regardless of the effects that are thought to accrue from such resources, *per se*. We would conjecture that being treated less unfairly with respect to educational resources would help people to feel better about themselves and perhaps more likely to exhibit some of the unspecified characteristics which Jencks thinks contribute to success out of school. We would also anticipate that such effects require a considerable time interval to develop. Jencks simply does not have any data that measure these noncognitive effects of reduced inequality over time.

The data which seem most likely to challenge the assumption that more education leads to higher income are those which Jencks cites to show that the average earnings of workers in few occupational categories deviate markedly from the national average. We have been wont to claim that while increased school, say high school graduation, is not a sufficient cause of mobility, it is necessary for entering better paid occupations or for getting the additional education which

provides credentials for more prestigious and higher paid occupations. Yet, Jencks' data seem to suggest that occupations requiring more education for entry do not necessarily pay much more than those requiring less formal education.

At least two aspects of the study's occupational data and the conclusions drawn from them are troubling.[1] First, the figures Jencks reports give mean earnings of *full-time, year-round* workers by occupational category. However, such figures exclude underemployed workers in all categories and, hence, those who are paid at lower rates and probably less well educated. The use of data pertaining only to the stably employed members of the work force may account for some of the unexpected findings. Secondly, while inter-occupational differences in mean incomes are not the differences between rags and riches, they are not insignificant. The mean earnings for male workers in the clerical, craftsmen, and salaried professional categories are 102.3, 108.5, and 146 percent of the national mean, respectively, compared to 89.6, 84.4, and 74.2 percent for operatives, service workers, and laborers.[2] One would be more likely to escape poverty and relative deprivation in the former three categories, which are also ones in which workers are likely to have more schooling, than in the latter three groupings. These few examples of questionable use of data suggest that Jencks' work, itself a secondary analysis, should be carefully scrutinized before we accept what may be unwarranted conclusions about the results of school reform.

Although he is not urging deschooling or reduction in school spending, Jencks' work is regarded as an attack on the schools. One reason why he is misunderstood is that he has failed to emphasize the difference between saying that schools do not equalize and saying they do not educate. Just because schools make it difficult for poor children to learn as much or to get as far as more advantaged pupils does not mean both would learn to read or to do a host of other things without school. Poor children, in particular, are unlikely to learn academic skills anywhere else.

As we read Jencks, he is not saying that it matters little what we spend on education as others here have noted. Rather, he does emphasize that schools should be decent, pleasant places and that they are more likely to be so if facilities are attractive and teacher-pupil ratios high. Jencks maintains that he is not urging that schools be like mediocre summer camps, but we wonder if he means by this that they should be like good summer camps. We salute his emphasis on schools as wholesome, happy places, but we think that such schools are ones in which teachers continue to try to stretch everyone's cognitive capacity as far as it will reach, without straining it. Emphasizing the overwhelming limitations of pupil's backgrounds, whether the villain be biology or social conditions, can be a road back to blaming the child for not learning and letting ourselves off the hook.

Egalitarians like Jencks favor equal distribution of primary social goods or those resources which people consider vital, because such equality is just or fair. It is thus not necessary to justify educational equality on the basis of its contribution to economic equality. But policymakers eager to cut HEW expenditures are likely to seize Jencks' premature conclusions about the results of school reforms as an excuse for cutbacks, particularly since he hasn't stressed sufficiently that schools teach, even if they don't equalize. We agree with Jencks that it is important to create greater equality directly through income redistribution; therefore, in times like these we need books that help us to value equality more, rather than schools less.

NICOLAUS MILLS

My feeling is that the Jencks' book is an important book, but at the same time, the attention it commands derives from one overwhelming factor: that there has been an enormous attack on the public schools today, and nothing is so welcome as an attack from someone whose social position seems much closer to the Left than to the Right. I think this partly explains the popularity of Ivan Illich's attack on schools. And I think in many ways it explains the growing popularity of the work by Jencks and his associates. Although we can agree with Jencks in some respects, ultimately this book is extraordinarily misleading, in terms of what it suggests and in terms of what it cites as evidence. However, let me begin with the positive.

I think that Jencks is very right to say that schools are not and should not be the exclusive means for changing society. When we look at the nineteenth century, it becomes very clear that the schools never were the social lever they were said to be. The Irish, for example, relied heavily on politics to gain power. Italian communities often felt that it was better to have their children earning income and supplying it to their families, rather than remaining in school. The school did not serve as the automatic social ladder we often assume it to be. I think Jencks' study confirms the fact that schools are not now the major route to social mobility, any more than they were in the past.

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[1] I appreciate the help of Dr. James Jones of the Columbia University School of Social Work with whom I discussed the issues in this section.

[2] Christopher Jencks, *Inequality: A Reassessment of Family and Schooling in America.* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972), p. 225.

Second of all, Jencks is saying equality of opportunity cannot create equality of results. This is an important position, and I think it calls into question the rationale for many New Frontier and New Society programs which held that by increasing people's employability through education and job training you would increase income equality. The programs were geared not to equalization of wealth but to some training opportunities. These, in turn, did not lead to significantly different earnings or income. We know now that there is an extraordinary gap between what results and what is aimed for.

Jencks is right to focus on the final goal, which is creating much more equality of income, not merely expanding health, education, and welfare programs. There is a need for increasing jobs, raising wages, and offering more choices of jobs, so that people are not simply channeled into one area.

Finally, I think Jencks is right in saying that even if the schools are not so economically productive as they are said to be, we should focus on them simply because people spend approximately one-fifth of their entire lives in school. And that time should be spent in more wholesome and happier places, not in factories which treat human beings as inputs and outputs. Schools should be evaluated by criteria we associate with the family.

Having dealt with all of these important positive emphases in *Inequality*, we can begin to question its fundamental tenet: that the school is not to be regarded as a basic element in the social and economic scale. I think there are numerous areas in which Jencks fails to prove this position. For one thing, he talks about the school in relation to the income people make in a given year. He concludes that the school itself, as opposed to other factors, accounts for about four percent of the difference in yearly income. Well, I think that putting the difference in this way results in an extraordinary underestimate. Jencks is talking about what happens in a given year of a person's life. He is not talking about what occurs over a lifetime. If you begin to multiply those four percents, the totals become quite considerable. Statistics that Melville Ulmer has used show that the differences between school levels such as graduate, college, high school, or merely an elementary school education often come to hundreds of thousands of dollars.[3]

A second problem with this work is that it uses rather vague forms of classification. For example, the authors say that the differences *between* professions are not nearly as significant as the differences *within* a single occupation. But Jencks fails to point out that the category of engineers can include a variety of people, both in highly paid and expensive jobs and at a technician's moderate level of salary. He does not take into account that the differences within an occupation reflect a doctor's salary in the prime years of a lucrative practice and the relatively meager pay of an intern, who is also classified as an M.D. Furthermore, to stress intra-occupational differences is perhaps to overlook the fact that a doctor who opts for low pay as the head of a charity clinic has a lot more choice than the factory worker who makes more money than he. Obviously, the doctor's schooling permits him the opportunity to make the choice between income and service.

Finally, I find that while the text itself is often quite confident about the statistics upon which it relies, the footnotes reflect the shaky grounds on which many conclusions rest. Let's take, for example, the discussion of I.Q. factors. First, Jencks says that genotype explains about forty-five percent of the variance in I.Q. scores. Then he goes on to say, "In gamblers' terms this means that we think the chances are about two out of three that heritability of I.Q. scores, as we have defined the terms, is between thirty-five and fifty-five percent." Then he says he's not even sure of that variation and concludes that he thinks that the chances are about nineteen out of twenty that heritability is between twenty-five and sixty-five percent, figures twenty percent on either side of the original best guess.[4] I think this kind of very hazy calculation goes on throughout his book, and it seems to me that while he is sometimes modest enough to acknowledge these limitations, he does not let these acknowledged uncertainties shape the general thrust of his outlook.

Similarly, Jencks' vague use of statistics tends to understate the relationship betweeen schooling and income. In this regard, he refers to such minimal effects as a year's difference in school attendance. It is true that a year at certain stages—between third and fourth grade or the junior or sophomore year of high school—is relatively unimportant. But if the difference is between three years of high school or college and graduating, the effects on earnings over a lifetime may not be minimal. A more satisfactory presentation would specify just where in the school career such differences occur.

So it seems to me that what we do have in Jencks is a very real concern for economic and social equality, a very flawed way of measuring

[3] Melville J. Ulmer, "The Schooling Matter," *The New Republic*. Vol. 167, No. 19 (Nov. 18, 1972), pp. 27-30.

[4] Jencks, p. 315.

the relationship between schooling and equality, and finally, recommendations which, while they might possibly encourage further social planning and experimentation, will ultimately discourage efforts to make school more responsive to the needs of the poor, and of others, as well. I am not convinced, finally, that the Jencks book is good or positive, and I think that we really have to proceed to evaluate it in very harsh terms.

DAVID WILDER

I would like to begin by acknowledging briefly that this is an extremely complex work about an extremely complex topic, on which the authors did no original research. Rather, the book consists of a collection of secondary analyses which, according to the volume's introduction, were put together partly in a Harvard seminar. This was a worthy enterprise—to try to review and to do a secondary analysis of a rather rigorous sort on works by James Coleman[5], Otis D. Duncan[6], and others. However, trying to compile these data in some sort of book form leaves a great many gaps. Clearly, this isn't the place to get into the nitty-gritty of the methodological and technological problems. But let me allude in a very general way to some of the shortcomings in the authors' use and choice of data.

First, as I've already noted, these data have been around for a while and were collected for rather different purposes than that for which the authors have used them. In some respects, they were stretched for purposes beyond that for which they were intended.

Secondly, I call into question the authors' use of the school as the unit of analysis. By this I mean to say that if we are measuring the effect of schools by comparing one school with another, the amount of variation that takes place within schools tends to be obscured. Now this is something Jencks and his colleagues are aware of, and they do allude to it from time to time, particularly when they talk about such items as curriculum grouping and tracking, but they also back away from it somewhat. I'm merely trying to suggest that I think that it's precisely at the micro-sociological level that the effects of school might be more important and more discernible.

If we take a look at some earlier sociologists of education, like Durkheim, we find that they regarded the school as a very important instrument of socialization. Socialization is a term which encompasses not just cognitive growth, but other types of learning as well. It's very difficult to discuss this work without falling into the same trap that its authors have, that of regarding monetary success as the major result of having gone to school. This sticks in my craw. What bothers me can best be illustrated by pointing out that if we treat schools as single units, and if you decide to study economics and I study history or English, you will probably make more money even if we have the same amount of education and attend the same school. To infer that such findings call into question the assumed positive relationships between amount of schooling and income is misleading. The linear analysis employed in this volume can obscure these kinds of differences.

Another problem in accepting the cognitive outputs of schools as their primary goal is that it tends to reinforce the early failure system that the schools encourage at this time. One of the lamentable aspects of the early research of Coleman on high schools was his disparagement of the schools' emphasis on athletics—to what he considered the detriment of academic performance. It seems to me again that if we take a more sober look at the older sociologists of education, we find that they recognized the safety-valve aspects of athletics in schools. I suggest that athletic competition serves not only the useful purpose of a symbolic integrating activity but that it offers alternative routes for success for students who do not perform very well academically. And I suspect, as Jencks acknowledges from time to time, it's asking a bit too much to expect everyone to perform well academically. Yet, blaming the schools for failing to achieve this goal is somehow a trap that seems to keep opening as one goes through the book.

This book departs from a number of recent studies in its use of individual rather than group statistics. There is, for example, less emphasis on differences between blacks and whites than on the range of individual variations, particularly with regard to income. It would appear to me that Jencks and his fellow authors use individual rather than group statistics because their ultimate dependent variable is income, which is individually earned. I assume that in this respect they were following a very rich individualistic American tradition.

I would like to point out, as Nick Mills already has, that the Jencks study is not telling us anything new about the effects or lack of effects of schooling. One merely has to look at the old community studies done during the twenties to

[5]James Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Education, 1966).

[6]Otis D. Duncan, *Socioeconomic Background and Achievement*. (New York: Seminar Press, 1972).

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learn that earlier sociologists found that schools tended to reinforce what was already going on in the homes. Curiously, all of these studies seem to be telling the story for the first time. As opposed to describing phenomena that have been operative and studied for the past fifty years, we should be asking how schools can avoid reinforcing the effects of ascribed status, or of the various benefits that people are lucky enough to inherit.

I think my chief problem with the book is that the focus of research is not on how one might improve schools or education but rather on how we can use the schools to do what I don't think they are supposed to be doing: namely, improving the distribution of economic rewards in our society. I think that should be a job for other institutions, and I would hate our concern with economic equalization—and it's a legitimate concern—to deflect us from what I consider to be far more important educational problems.

JOSEPH GRANNIS

I happen to be feeling very strongly about this book, having read cautious reviews and having participated in a pretty cautious discussion with May Jo Bane (one of the authors of *Inequality* who came to Teachers College to respond to questions of Teachers College faculty and other concerned educators). I've read the book for the fourth or fifth time for this occasion, and I'm emboldened to be as critical of it as my colleagues here have already been.

I find myself asking how the book manages to set up what appear to be straw men, namely the assumption that schools can contribute to employability by way of improvements in cognitive ability. I feel these assumptions, which the authors tend to impute to others, are really their assumptions and that it's a little bit like studying one's own navel. Not everyone shared the assumptions on which many programs of the sixties were based; maybe it's especially the Jencks team who are so surprised to find out that the world is quite different from what they thought it to be.

Naturally, because politics and policy-making are very much concerned with investments and the results of these expenditures, we are all forced to make assumptions about what schools can accomplish. And those assumptions are brought into serious question here. On the other hand, especially as professionals, we bring a different kind of intuition and experience to bear which tells us it's absolutely foolish to think schools in general make the differences Jencks claims we assume they make. Most schools are the creatures of the society at large, of the local culture, and of many other factors. In our experience of going into schools we find the effective school an exception. That's my experience and that of virtually everybody I talk with here at Teachers College. And if anyone is seriously concerned with improving education, they don't make general claims that schooling will change the distribution of wealth. Instead, they identify a little more precisely those relatively rare cases where a school or a classroom is especially effective, and then they proceed to find out why. For example, it's important that dropout rates differ, even among schools serving pupils of comparable socio-economic status. One wants to go to these schools and find out how and why they're different, not simply run some statistics and prove that nothing is going on because these statistics don't pan out.

But this book, as Jencks reveals in his preface, has a different purpose from that of improving education. Before he ever participated in the Harvard Seminar, he had begun work in Washington at the Institute for Policy Studies on a book about the limits of schooling. Jencks is attempting to show the limits of schooling, but, one asks, limited for what? The only answer given in the book is that schools are limited in their effect on redistribution of income. Yet, the book has seemed to suggest far more sweeping limitations of schooling than the authors are able to demonstrate in a systematic fashion.

I, too, am troubled about the short shrift that the authors give to the noncognitive effects of schooling—about three or four pages in a rather large volume. They reason that intuition and personal experience have proven a poor guide to the measurement of cognitive effects—perhaps particularly their own intuition—and that most tests of attitudes, values, and character are even less reliable than achievement tests, of which they take a dim view. There is, in fact, a lot of experience and intuition, but some studies as well, which suggest that one of the most important determinants of the effectiveness of the school is the leadership of the principal, a factor given considerable attention in the studies of principalship by Neal Gross and his associates.[7] Obviously, the quality of a principal's leadership is difficult to assess, and presumably it's one of the relatively unmeasurable factors which the authors chose to write off under the rubric of climate in the school. So they turn, instead, to such quantitative factors as the amount of money invested in a school. And they find that schools or school systems are relatively equal in their use of such measureable resources. Yet, schools are

[7] Neal Gross and Robert E. Herriott, *Staff Leadership in Schools: A Sociological Inquiry*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965).

clearly unequal with respect to principalship, which is probably not correlated highly with some of the quantitative inputs that turn out to be less significant than the statisticians anticipate.

The authors point out rather early in the text that one of the reasons why their conclusions might be different from those of others is that they have studied inequality between individuals rather than among groups. They emphasize the range of individual inequality partly because they find that while the average income of whites is about twice that of the average black, the richest white earns one hundred times as much as the poorest white. Yet, I feel that their emphasis overlooks an important ethical issue, namely that a whole group of individuals ends up considerably below a whole other category of individuals. Somehow an ethic of fairness is violated if group outcomes are so different, if people are being treated as members of categories rather than as individuals. The authors report that sixteen percent of white students drop out of high school, compared with thirty-four percent of blacks.[8] With a different construction of the argument, figures such as these would be a more central finding, rather than a peripheral outcome. One wonders in this case how much the authors' choice of research strategies was influenced by a growing trend away from social-change strategies which focus on group solutions to overcome group inequality.

I would like to point out that abandoning all hope in what the schools can accomplish is just as unfortunate and politically motivated as vesting all hope in them. The question remains, what part might the schools play in the reconstruction of society? Dare the schools build a new social order? Like much in this book, it's a whimper in the right direction for the authors to say that schools should be happy, decent places in which to spend time. But beyond that, school is a place where many of us, both as professionals and as citizens, feel we have the opportunity to construct the microcosm of an ideal society. An innovation like community control, for example, is not merely to be measured narrowly in terms of cognitive effects, but in the broadest sense of what it means to gain control over some part of one's life.

[8] Jencks, p. 19.

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